Nature in Miniature

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NATURE IN MINIATURE

PEOPLE say that the beauty of Chinese gardens lies in the ingenious arrangement of the scenes of nature within a limited area. A miniature landscape is a still greater contraction of nature into a pot or tray. A foot-high tree with twisted trunk and dark green leaves may recall its century-old counterpart on a mountain, or a few well-placed stones in a small tray of water suggest rolling hills by a flowing river. Summer or winter, these miniature three-dimensional pictures bring the breath of nature into the home.

Miniature landscape gardening began in China at least 1,200 years ago when the poet Wang Wei (699-759) grew orchids in a yellow porcelain pot and placed white pebbles around them to add to their elegance. Since then the skill has developed and endless variations have been created. Though styles vary from region to region, often influenced by characteristics of local landscape, these diminutive scenes of nature fall into two categories — dwarf trees and rock landscapes.

Dwarf trees usually are pine, cypress, juniper, elm or maple, grown from tiny stumps many years old found in mountain areas where constant cut-over and barren, rocky soil have stunted them. They are transplanted into pots in the spring or autumn rainy season. Growth is controlled by trimming the shoots and leaves. The young branches are pruned and tied to produce various shapes and effects — thick gnarled trunks with layers of foliage, slender straight trunks with sparse graceful branches, or trunks looking as if they overhang from sheer cliffs. Sometimes two or three or as many as a dozen trees are planted in one pot to make them look like a forest. To create perspective and give the impression of their life-size originals, the trunks, branches and leaves must be kept in correct proportion to one another. Though the plants are reduced in size, the artist's touch has enhanced the aesthetic enjoyment they give.

A ROCK LANDSCAPE is made up chiefly of carefully selected stones placed in a tray filled with water. The Chinese people have always had a deep feeling for rocks and stones, using them singly or in combinations to decorate gardens, or depicting them in paintings as a symbol of strength and firmness. For rock landscapes, sandstone or stalactites are often used because they are soft enough to be chiselled easily into the desired shapes. Hard rocks such as the *ling bi* and *ying* stones from the mountains of Anhwei and Canton are chosen because their strange shapes, glistening surfaces and delicate veins simulate the beauty of mountains.

An important step in the creation of a rock landscape is the composition. Like the elements in a Chinese traditional painting, a few stones artistically arranged suggest a whole scene. A group of sheer rocks taking up half the tray is balanced by a lone lofty crag to give the effect of a deep gorge. A large rock of fantastic shape is offset by a tiny one to create a feeling of a wide expanse of water. Rocks of gentle contour are spaced out in the tray to evoke the tranquility of a lake.

The rock mountains are brought to life by touches of green trees and moss. Tiny trees are planted in the crevices where water can be drained. Young moss scraped from bricks is pounded and the juice smeared on the rocks. Sprayed with water, this grows into a thin velvety layer. Where there are depressions in the rocks the moss is allowed to grow densely. On sunny slopes or mountain paths, it is scraped off at places to produce the effect of sparseness. The whole scene may be livened up by the careful use of tiny clay models — a pagoda, pavilion, hut or human figure at suitable spots, a bridge connecting two hills or boats in the water.

CARE of miniature landscapes is a skill requiring exact horticultural knowledge. The dwarf trees must get enough sunlight and fresh air but not too much exposure to a hot sun. Soil must allow good drainage but still hold enough water to keep the roots moist. Since the soil in a pot is limited, proper application of fertilizer is important. The care of rock landscapes is simpler. The trays are kept filled with water and placed out of the sun.

Choice of containers is important for complementing the beauty of the plants and rocks. Evergreens are grown in simply designed buff or earthy red stoneware pots which harmonize with the vigour of the plants — for straight trees, shallow rectangular or oval pots; for overhanging trees, square or round ones, always deep, to help convey the impression of a steep cliff. Garden plants are generally cultivated in white porcelain pots to set off the green leaves and bright colours of flowers. For rock landscapes, shallow trays are used to give full exposure to the scenes and enhance the depth and distance of perspective. The colour of the tray is generally white in contrast to the darker hues of the rocks.

The stands on which the dwarf trees and rock landscapes are placed give the finishing touch. They are made of redwood, rosewood, sandalwood or aged tree roots, in traditional style and in shapes harmonizing with the pots or trays.

Many people cultivate miniature landscapes, and amateur gardeners have formed societies and hold regular exhibitions to exchange knowledge of their art and create more varieties. Such landscapes are also displayed in the gardens and parks of Canton, Shanghai, Soochow, Chengtu and Hangchow for the enjoyment of the people.

Chou Cheng

Maple

by Li Tsung-yu, Szechuan

Towering cliffs
by Chu Tzu-an, Soochow

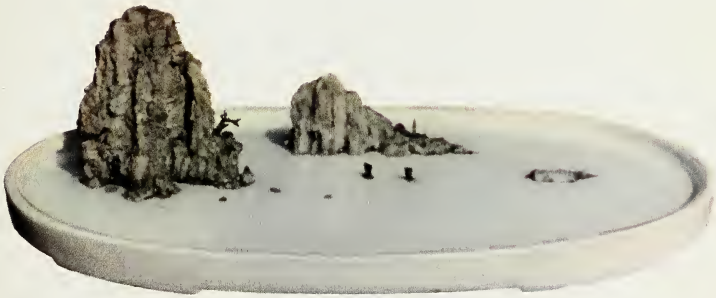
Chinese flowering quince
by Chou Shou-chuan, Soochow

Northern catalpa, 200 years old

by Chu Tzu-an, Soochow

Hedge sageretia

by Tan Chun-chen, Kwangtung



Homing fishing boats

by Chen Shao-chun, Shanghai

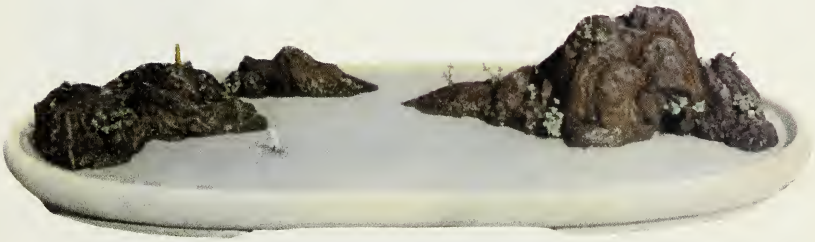
Elm, 100 years old
by Chu Tzu-an, Soochow

Huangshan peak

by Li Tsung-yu, Szechuan

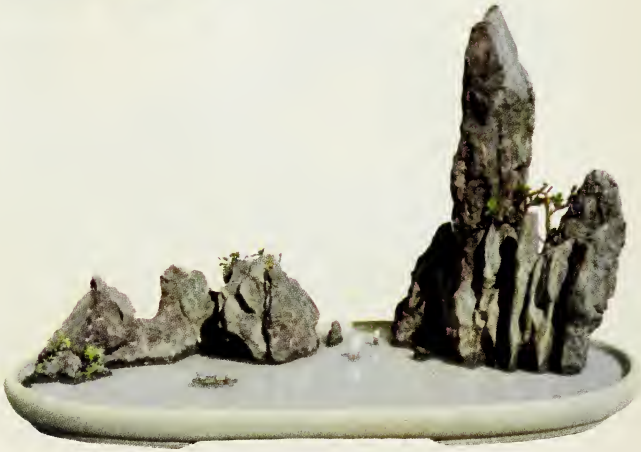
Summer snow tree
by Li Tsung-yu, Szechuan

Tea shrubs
by Chen Yen, Kwangtung



The calm lake
by Tung Shu-yu, Shanghai

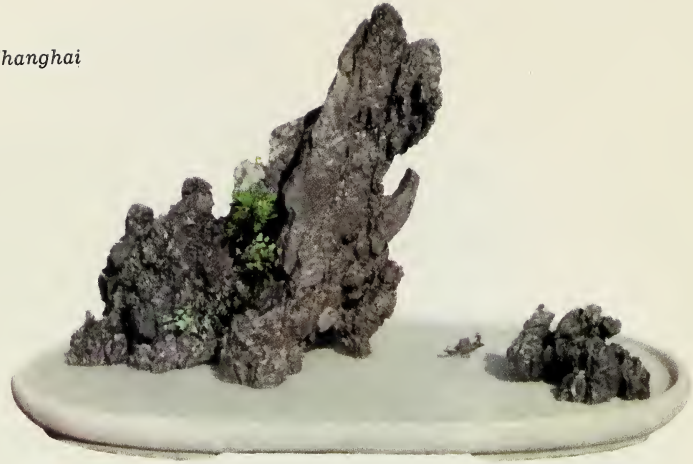
Hedge sageretia
by Chu Tzu-an, Soochow



Through the gorge
by Hsu Chih-ming, Shanghai

Japanese white pine
by Fang Pu-yun, Shanghai

Overhanging cliff
by Hsu Chih-ming, Shanghai



Rocks and pine
by Li Tsung-yu, Szechuan

Elm

by Lin Chiang, Kwangtung

Miniature honeysuckle, holly, maple, one to three inches high
by Chou Shou-chuan, Soochow

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COVER PICTURE: Jasmine orange (Murraya paniculata) *Grown by Su Jen*